

# INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION

by J. C. Hardwick

Vicar of Partington, Cheshire, and formerly  
Chaplain and Tutor of Ripon Hall, Oxford

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## AFFIRMATIONS

*God in the Modern World*







# A F F I R M A T I O N S

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# INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION

“Society and social organisation is the normal condition of our religious, as it is of our moral and rational life and development.”  
GEORGE TYRRELL, *A Much-Abused Letter*.

## WHAT IS THE USE OF CHURCHES ?

“RELIGION,” says Professor Whitehead, “is what the individual does with his own solitariness.”<sup>1</sup> And if this is a complete definition of religion, it immediately becomes a question whether religious institutions may not be useless or pernicious ; or at least, if we do not go so far as this, we may at any rate conclude that their importance in the life of religion is far smaller than has generally been supposed. If religion is solitariness, it will not help you to go to church except when the church is empty ; all this herd religion will depress and not stimulate the genuinely religious man. He will feel with Dr. Whitehead that “Collective enthusiasms, revivals, institutions, churches, rituals, bibles, codes of behaviour, are the trappings of religion, its passing forms.”

It *is* true, of course, that religion is (wherever it is genuine) a personal affair ; in this respect it resembles love or hate, or any deep-seated and deeply felt emotion. I do not love by proxy, nor do I need educating how to fall in love, nor yet do I need the stimulation of crowd emotion to enable me to do so—not at least if I am healthily constituted. The lover is probably most in love when he is alone ; more, probably, than when he is in the actual presence of his mistress. But in any case everyone knows that, in love, two is company and three is none. Hence it is that institutions for the

<sup>1</sup> *Religion in the Making* (1927), p. 6.

promotion of love are not felt to be necessary. Every man and woman conducts this very individual affair each in his or her own way.

Yet it will be found that even in the case of an individual matter like love, which like religion feeds on solitariness, the individual is by no means free, even in these emancipated days, to let his love carry him whither it will. He and it are hedged round with all sorts of restrictions ; and even in an Utopia of free love, these might not altogether disappear. The fact is that between the lover and his desired there often stands the cold, restraining hand of tradition. Nor is it necessary to assume that tradition is invariably in the wrong ; it may occasionally save us from ourselves, for tradition is no more (or no less) than accumulated experience. And tradition usually embodies itself in institutions ; for example, marriage. And although individuals may feel discontented, and perhaps rightly, with the present form of this particular institution, they would be prepared (if they are in their right senses) to attach some value to the institution itself, apart from the particular form it happens to take, since it embodies the experience of the race. The fact is that institutions are not, as some suppose them to be, artificially manufactured racks designed expressly to torture the souls and bodies of men ; nor yet beds of Procrustes, to fit which men have to be lopped and maimed ; they are just arrangements which the human race has gradually built up to enable life to run with a minimum of friction.

Now if we admit (as I think we are bound to do) that it is a good thing that the freedom of love should be restricted by an institution such as marriage (and by marriage I mean, for the moment, some sort of permanent arrangement between the sexes sanctioned by custom or law), why should not the freedom of religion be similarly restricted ?

### IS RELIGION A GOOD THING ?

The answer usually given to a question of this sort is that love, or sexual emotion, is such a dangerous thing if



given its head, that society has to keep a watchful eye upon it. We cannot let every man satisfy his lusts just as he will. There has to be a point when public opinion steps in, and a still further point when the policeman steps in. Sentimentalists plead for freedom, but do they include freedom to rape immature girls or to debauch young boys? Even in an Utopia of free eroticism such excesses would have to be discouraged—by devout homilies and exhortations, if punishments were felt to be wicked.

Everyone, then, even the free-lovers, feels that sexual emotion and sexual activity are things which society must check by institutions or laws written or unwritten. It is felt that we cannot tolerate a riot of individualism here. That would be too much of a good thing.

But in the case of religion, people hesitate to believe that this can be as dangerous a thing as sex. Most people consider it to be a good thing, or at least (this is the opinion of the majority to-day) quite harmless. They consider it perfectly safe to allow people to be as religious as they like in what way they like. It cannot possibly do them harm, and may conceivably do them good. But, as Dr. Whitehead reminds us, "In considering religion, we should not be obsessed by the idea of its necessary goodness. This is a dangerous delusion. The point to notice is its transcendent importance."

Here we have two most uncommon truths emphasised, (1) that religion is not necessarily a good thing, any more than uncontrolled sexual desire, and (2) that it is a thing of which it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance. Both these points alike are too often overlooked by those who profess to understand the religious problem. The truth is that religion, like sex, is both dangerous and important.

Thus, if institutions and regulations are desirable and necessary in the case of sex, why should they not be so in the case of religion?

The eighteenth century, a period which it is now customary to say did not understand religion, was at least alive to the truth that religion must not be allowed

to run riot. Hence its loathing and contempt for what it called "enthusiasm," and also for another religious aberration, i.e. superstition. It was his whole-hearted and instinctive dislike for these things which prompted the exquisite rancour of the historian Gibbon when he wrote of the early Church. He did not realise sufficiently, how great was the part which the Church played in helping to put down "enthusiasm" and superstition at a time when such things were as much of an incubus upon humanity in Europe, as they are in India to-day. Readers of *Mother India* are in a position to understand what religion can achieve in the way of sheer cruelty and sodden ignorance.

Professor Kirsopp Lake in a work which sheds much light upon the *milieu* in which Christianity originated, has made some observations, which I shall venture to quote at length, so apposite do they appear to me to be for our present purpose, which is to suggest that unless guided by healthy institutions religion may run very much to seed, and this even in the modern world :

"*Corruptio optimi pessima* ; and it is in the twentieth century, in the west of Europe, difficult to realise the possibility of a religious impulse expressing itself in immoral acts, but the fact is nevertheless indisputable that it has formerly done so. The point is that cultus—the ritual expression of religious impulse—is not a measure of religion only, but also of other elements in the nature of the person who is trying to express this impulse. Go back two thousand years and you will find that the nature of many men was such that they attempted to express, and to stimulate, their religious life by sexual excesses. . . .

"Nothing comes out more clearly in the history of religions, than that religion, in the attempt to work out forms of worship, has had to deal with three enemies—cruelty, obscenity, and superstition. The first of these had been practically conquered, for civilised nations, before our era ; the conquest of the second was the especial task of primitive Christianity. . . . The struggle is so remote from our generation that it is hard to realise

that our forefathers had to fight hard to prevent Christian culture from becoming corrupted, but clear traces of the struggle can be found in the Apocalypse, in Jude, in 2 Peter, in Irenæus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Epiphanius, the *Pistis Sophia*, and minor authorities. In all of them we can see the struggle against various forms of obscene heresies. . . . How well Christianity succeeded can be seen by the difficulty which we experience in realising that the task ever existed.”<sup>1</sup>

The only criticism I have to pass here is that it is by no means necessary to go back two thousand years to find people attempting to express, and stimulate, their religious life by sexual excesses, and *vice versa*. It was evidently not uncommon, for instance, in the Middle Ages. There were the Witchcults with their secret rites, dances, and pleasurable orgies, which were survivals of the old pre-Christian paganism which still lurked in forests, fens, and heaths long after the townships had become more or less civilised.<sup>2</sup> These practices served the Church as a pretext for persecuting more innocent heretics.

Nor is it necessary to go back even to the Middle Ages. When the grip of institutional control upon religion weakened somewhat at the Reformation, some very curious sects displayed themselves, towards whom the Reformed Churches were as little tolerant as the Catholic Church itself. Sexual licence seemed to go with religious licence; free-love and nudity are accompaniments of certain kinds of emotional ecstasy. Even in our own day religious “revivals” usually increase the birth rate of illegitimate children for so long as the fever endures.

A year or two ago the religious world was shocked and scandalised by a book purporting to portray the religious life of America. And there is very little doubt that

<sup>1</sup> *Earlier Epistles of St. Paul* (Second Edition, 1919), pp. 178 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Those interested in the evidence for all this should consult Miss Murray's *Witch-cult in Western Europe*, R. Lowe Thompson's *The History of the Devil* (1929) and Dr. E. J. Martin's *Trial of the Templars*, against whom some very interesting charges of secret obscenities were brought, not always perhaps on good grounds.

*Elmer Gantry* gives a tolerably truthful picture of affairs in a country where, though fundamentalism is almost universal, religious authority is almost unknown. In the lively pages of Mr. Sinclair Lewis's novel we see religion running riot in a debauch of unrestrained emotionalism. It is not an edifying spectacle, but one which we do well to glance at, before we conclude that we have only to emancipate the masses from the churches in order to make them both rational and moral. As a matter of fact, if the churches were closed we should not have less but more superstition, and superstition of a far more debased kind. The new paganism which we see around us to-day professes to be emancipated from religion, but is in reality fast becoming enslaved to a whole tribe of new superstitions. The woman who is an agnostic or atheist to-day, will be a Theosophist or a Christian Scientist, or a New Thoughtist, or a believer in mascots to-morrow. The choice in most cases is not between having and not having a religion, but between having a good religion and a bad one.

The idea that if a man gives up going to church, he will at once become a rationalist like John Stuart Mill, or (better still) a mystical genius like Spinoza, is a delusion. In nine cases out of ten he merely falls a victim to the first form of superstition that comes along, frequently of the crudest and most atavistic kind. And the notion that if we give up all religious authority, we shall get religious truth, is as reasonable as to hope for scientific truth by demolishing all the laboratories. It is only a form of the modern democratic superstition that everybody is equally qualified to pronounce upon every subject under the sun; that religion is a subject of which people have exhausted the intellectual content as soon as they have left the elementary school. There is no doubt that a great deal of modern scepticism and irreligion is both shallow and irrational. The saying of Renan's was a wise one, that very few people have earned the right to disbelieve in Christianity. They have not the knowledge or insight to understand it, still less to criticise it.

## THE USE OF A CHURCH

A church, or religious institution, then, need not be so useless and pernicious as is sometimes supposed. Even granting that religion is what a man does with his solitariness, it does not follow that he can dispense with institutions, since it is important that what he does with his solitariness should be reasonable and right. Of this there is, of course, no guarantee whatever. A man may occupy his solitariness with dreams, or morbid imaginings, or harmful superstitions, or again with mere silliness. There is no guarantee that stupid and ignorant people (who are far more numerous than our *intelligentsia* imagine) will not think and act stupidly if left to themselves. There is no certainty that the man in the street will, unassisted, arrive at truth in the sphere of religion any more than in the sphere of art or science. The opinions of the average man are generally a set of irrational prejudices. I am afraid that Dr. Whitehead, who spends his whole time among highly intelligent people, has little conception of the mentality of the average man in a crowd. Mr. Sinclair Lewis would, I am sure, in this region be a far safer guide.

And if I were asked what is the use of churches, I should reply that they keep religion from going bad; they are at present the chief barrier against a revival of superstition, far more potent than popular education, in which, having seen a good deal of the results of it, I have no belief whatever.

A church, as I see it, embodies a tradition, one to which innumerable different individuals, many of them men and women of profound genius, have contributed, and one which is as old as civilisation itself. A church possesses a technique of religion (i.e. of praise, prayer, worship, meditation, and sacrament) which sums up the experience and practice of many generations. A church in short is a treasury of spiritual riches, gradually and laboriously accumulated, ready to be used, and to be increased. It is to be feared that it is very often ignorance nowadays which prompts an individual to

try to live his religious life apart from all religious institutions ; he does not know what he is sacrificing.

" Life on a desert island is simplified—and starved. To find everything for oneself . . . means sterility in every department of life, inward and outward. Can religion be an exception ? " <sup>1</sup>

### ORGANISM OR MACHINE ?

The foregoing remarks are based on the view that all human institutions are growths rather than manufactured articles, natural not artificial. Though I believe this to be true in the case of all modern institutions, such, for instance, as a joint-stock company (the nature and constitution of which depend on a long commercial and legal tradition which has developed gradually), it is demonstrably true in the case of ancient institutions such as churches. It is true that a particular church, such as the Wesleyan, for example, may be able to point to a particular founder who drew up its constitution, or to a particular date when it began an independent existence ; but that does not affect the principle. The Wesleyan Church did not *begin* with John Wesley, any more than the Roman Church began with Pope Hildebrand, or the English Church with Cranmer. No Wesleyan in his senses would claim that John Wesley invented the religion believed and practised by Wesleyans.

The writer already quoted has put this organic view so well that I give his words :

" A true religion is a growth and not a manufacture. The so-called founders of new religions have one and all sprung from old religions, which they have but modified and stamped with their own individuality. They have been reformers, not creators. What seems the most original and independent religious experience of the solitary mystic has invariably some historical religion behind it, of which it is the unconscious product. Our seemingly simplest ideas and words have been elaborated by generations of organised human life. . . . As little

<sup>1</sup> George Tyrrell, *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, p. 39.

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could one man create a new religion as a new language. A Chaucer, a Shakespeare, a Dante may at most inaugurate a new philological epoch.”<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that it is the anthropologists and historians who are best entitled to pronounce on the origins of churches and religions. The account given by Gibbon of the origins of the Catholic Church, though it may be wanting in religious insight and sympathy, is nevertheless substantially correct. He regarded Catholicism as a natural growth, and this is the view that scientific students, who have much more evidence at their disposal than had Gibbon, take of it to-day. Nor does this detract at all from the value of Catholicism. On the contrary, as Catholicism is a growth of immense antiquity, containing within itself religious and cultural elements of every kind, suitable for all sorts and conditions of men at different stages of development, it has every right to be regarded as an universal religion. It contains pools where lambs may drink and depths where elephants may swim.

This organic view of the Catholic religion and Church involves the corollary that just as there have been changes in the past, so there will be changes in the future, assuming, that is, that the Church and its religion are still alive, for change is evidence of life. An institution which displays unwillingness to change is probably moribund; the first characteristic of a healthy living organism is adaptability, combined with a voracious appetite and a strong digestion. It is not at all particular what it swallows, because it can convert everything into its own substance. Primitive Christianity was an organism of this healthy voracious sort, it swallowed down Neoplatonic mysticism, Oriental and Hellenistic sacramentalism, Roman legalism, and a score of other things besides. It is only in these latter days that the Church has become timid and dyspeptic, anxious about its diet, and wondering nervously what will agree with it, and how much of the higher criticism, or of modern science, it can safely swallow without getting upset.

<sup>1</sup> Tyrrell, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Opposed to this organic view of institutions, religious and other, is the view which regards them as manufactured articles, or machines once set running to continue the same movements for ever. Sometimes it suits a legislator to attach this sort of immutability and sanctity to a constitution, and to regard it as having been born full-grown, springing all-armed, as it were, from the head of Zeus. The American Constitution, and the Napoleonic Code, and perhaps the Soviet System, have had this sort of finality attributed to them. But these political systems, though they may have been formulated in a day, are made up of elements which had been in existence, or had been growing, for long periods ; they are the results of long processes of development. There is no such thing as an entirely new political constitution. Moreover, these sacred political systems will change, though the changes will be concealed as far as possible. If they do not change in one way they will change in another ; that is to say, if they do not grow they will decay.

And so it is with religious institutions. They may be represented as having come into existence at a particular time with doctrines, constitutions, and organisations all complete and "divinely ordained." Such historical figments enable those who hold them to regard all changes as impious.

### NEEDS, THE PARENTS OF INSTITUTIONS

But if institutions, religious and other, have not been brought into existence suddenly by divine fiat, but have grown up naturally and gradually, what was it that *made* them grow ? Did they just spring up casually without a cause ? Things do not so happen ; there is a reason for everything.

The natural view to take on the origin of institutions is that they are means for the satisfaction of human needs. Such an institution as the modern banking system has grown up out of the need for fluid capital. The Royal Navy was the result of a need for coastal defence and for



the keeping open of sea communications. Universities arose from a widespread desire for learning.

The need which has given rise to religious institutions, or churches, is the religious need, which is as natural and legitimate an appetite on the part of mankind, as that for food or sleep or recreation. It is impossible here to describe the religious need in any detail. It may suffice to say that men require some interpretation to put upon their lives, and desire to attach some meaning to them beyond the futility which seems to lie upon the surface. They also wish for some source of strength and patience that they can rely upon to help them at need. And besides this there is the desire to identify their own true nature with the better side of themselves, and yet at the same time to feel that they owe it to something outside themselves, apart from which they are nothing. Of course the satisfaction of this need may take different forms, as may the actual need itself, according to the nature of the persons who feel it. And a religion, to be of any use, has to be able to satisfy the need in a variety of forms ; that is to say, it has to be a religion not only for the few (for the few for example who can nowadays believe in miracle, or who possess the highly technical knowledge necessary to understand the creeds), but for the many. It must be a religion not only for the devout, but for the undevout (this is very largely the strength of Roman Catholicism), not only for the credulous but for the incredulous and the sceptical. If a religion cannot be a strength and stay to all sorts and conditions of men, it is of very little use in the world, and it is left to the eclectics and pietists, the spiritual exquisites and religious *poseurs*.

### WHY ARE CHURCHES EMPTY ?

It is generally admitted that institutional religion at present is in rather a poor way. Many churches and chapels are very ill attended, clergy are discouraged, and money is increasingly difficult to raise. It is a particularly bad sign also that candidates for the ministry

have declined both in quantity and quality, though we need not go so far as a recent writer and describe them as "the dregs of the Universities."<sup>1</sup> The process of decline, which had begun before the War, has since been very much accelerated. Churchgoing has simply dropped out of fashion. Even the country has been infected with the habits of the town, where the artisan is, as the Dean of St. Paul's has put it, "without religion and without superstitions," though perhaps this is too optimistic an estimate. In one of Thomas Hardy's novels two lovers are described as making an assignation for the time of morning service, since they might count upon all the villagers being safely in church at that hour. One presumes that this applies to a period some fifty or sixty years ago, and Hardy's details are usually accurate, and drawn from personal observation. To-day, if a village were deserted at the hour of divine service, it would be because the villagers were in bed, or away on a "chara" trip; they would certainly not be in church.

Mr. R. G. Collingwood has spoken about this with admirable candour:

"If the philosopher pipes to a generation that will not dance, he is in this not alone. Religion to-day is in much the same state. There is, thanks to our various communities and sects, a steady supply of religion laid before the public, and a supply so varied that one would expect all tastes to find satisfaction. But we actually see everywhere empty churches, or churches filled only by the popularity of a preacher or for some other personal reason, not because the religious principles for which they stand are such as give peace and consolation to the people who attend them. A man who devotes his life to religion, like one who devotes himself to philosophy, is offering wares in a market that cannot absorb them."<sup>2</sup>

Taking empty churches, or emptying churches, then, as a fact, however lamentable, which must be faced, let us pass on to inquire, why are so many empty? (Some, it must be remembered, are full; and these are

<sup>1</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds*, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> *Speculum Mentis* (1924), p. 16.

those where the preaching is thoughtful and the hymn-books modern.)

### THE CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS NEEDS

Assuming that religious institutions, or churches, exist to satisfy certain religious needs, their evident decline can be attributed to one of two causes. Either (1) the religious need is no longer felt in a modern community, or (2) the need exists, but the churches have ceased to be able to satisfy it *as it is now being felt*. That is to say that the religious need to-day takes such a form that our present religious institutions simply cannot deal with it—either because their hands are tied, or for some other reason.

### GUYAU'S PROPHECY

Towards the end of the nineteenth century (1887) appeared a very notable book by J. M. Guyau, entitled *L'Irréligion de l'Avenir*, translated into English as *The Non-Religion of the Future*. Were he alive to-day Guyau might be tempted to claim the honours belonging to successful prophecy. He would discover that the clergy, like the Welsh miners, have sunk into a class of unwanted producers; there is no one to consume their goods; the appetite for religion would appear to have gone. As oil has replaced coal, so something else (is it petrol?) has supplanted religion. The religious need has evaporated.

There seems to be no denying that the religious need is now far less acutely felt by large sections of the community than was the case a generation or two ago. A variety of causes may have contributed to this result.

One reason is that life as it is lived nowadays seems quite satisfying to a larger number of people than ever before, owing to increased facilities for recreation, distraction, and amusement of various kinds. Pleasure and sport are absorbing interests not only to those who indulge in them (an ever-increasing number) but also

to those who read about them in the cheap newspapers. Numerous people to-day live quite exciting lives at second hand, so to speak, by reading of the exploits of others. Not only the newspapers, but the cinema and the wireless, render this easy.

I do not mean to say that pleasure and excitement are necessarily hostile to religion, but they crowd religion out, and we must remember that a life which seems entirely satisfying to the man that lives it, calls for no explanation or interpretation. It is worth living for its own sake, it raises no problems or doubts, and does not require any sort of a larger background to render it tolerable. Thus religious interpretations and explanations seem redundant or irrelevant. The fact is that the religious standpoint is not reached by an individual until he sees that life as it is usually lived cannot be taken seriously, and that it actually is, as *Ecclesiastes* said it was, "vanity," i.e. something vapid and meaningless. And it is probable that the number of people who never reach this standpoint is larger to-day than ever before, which is why so many people at the present time are, for all practical purposes, pagans. It is not that they have rejected Christianity, they simply do not see the point of it. It has no meaning for them.

Of course paganism can be combined with religion. But in that case religion is usually a device for getting things for oneself; and nowadays, when everyone has some crude notions about natural science and the uniformity of nature, no one any longer believes that religion can enable one to do this. Prayer, for example, will not divert the course of events; nor will attending church tend to make your crops grow or influence prices on the market. This is another reason why religion has gone out of fashion. The only sort of religion that the majority of people can understand and appreciate, is one in which they can no longer believe.

#### FOOD-SUBSTITUTES

Thus there is no denying that the declining state of churches is due, to some extent at any rate, to a decline,

ind, ngst the general public, of the religious need. The  
order paganism has cut at the roots of churchgoing. And  
ti, posed these unfavourable conditions, churches are  
ti, posed to a very attractive, but at the same time fatal,  
emptation—the temptation to cater for other needs than  
those of a religious sort. It is hoped that a non-religious  
public will be drawn to church if only religion can be  
made sufficiently attractive by associating it with a number  
of things for which there is thought to be a demand, but  
with which in reality religion has very little to do. This  
policy has involved churches in the responsibility of  
supplying healthy entertainments for the masses and  
various forms of sociability for the middle-classes. This  
policy is clearly doomed to failure under present con-  
ditions, though it succeeded well enough during the  
closing decades of the nineteenth century, before the  
rise of cinemas, wireless, the cheap motor-car, and a  
whole galaxy of inexpensive amusements. The enter-  
tainments provided by the churches for a now sophisti-  
cated proletariat, in these days seem *un peu fadés*. The  
distracted and disillusioned incumbent of an industrial  
(or even a rural) parish to-day knows too well that he  
can never hope to rival the cinema, the dance hall, the  
dirt-track, the working men's club, the public billiard  
hall, the domestic loud-speaker, the well-cushioned  
charabanc, or the cheap motor-bicycle. All he can  
hope to do, ill equipped as he is, is to offer an inferior  
article with a little edification thrown in to compensate  
the consumer, but this does not go down in the modern  
world, and only exposes those who hope so to humilia-  
tions. This attempt to draw a non-religious public to  
church by lures of this kind no longer works. Our  
bait is inferior, or judged to be so by those who are  
asked to take it, the only people whose taste need be  
considered.

It is only too true that the commodity which the  
churches offer to the world is one for which at present  
there is only an infinitesimal demand. Yet the demand  
for an article will not be stimulated by offering some-  
thing quite different. If the article is of good quality,

the demand for it may revive, if the samples offered remain up to standard. Signs are not completely wanting that a demand for religion, tentative and uncertain, of beginning to arise ; and it would be a pity if the churches engrossed in the stunt and entertainment business, were not equal to supplying the need when at last it had shown itself.

Another way of offering stones for bread should be mentioned. Hardly less deleterious than the amusement-catering business is an excessive preoccupation with economic, political, and social questions. These are indeed intellectually and morally worthy of more respect than billiards, dances, whist-drives, teas, and so on ; but at the same time the fact remains that they are not religion, and it is notorious that many clergy interest themselves in such questions as a means of evading the genuinely religious problems which they are often afraid to tackle. Social enthusiasm has been made to cover any number of cowardly evasions in the intellectual sphere. A knowledge of economics is no adequate substitute for willingness and ability to face theological problems. But the demand for religion will hardly be stimulated by lectures on economics any more than by lectures on chemistry, useful and important as both those subjects are.

### BAD CATERING

To some extent then it may be true that institutional religion is on the decline because religious needs are not felt. The churches may pipe, but the public will not dance. The deaf adder stoppeth her ears.

Yet it is hard to believe that the religious need does not exist somewhere in the community, and to a greater extent than is reflected in the meagre church attendances which are now almost universal. May it not be that the need is here, but that it exists in a form which the churches do not, or cannot, satisfy ? May it not be that when it asks for bread, the public is put off with what appears to it to be a stone—something altogether too hard and

indigestible for consumption ? If this is so, the blame, or some portion of it, for the present decline of institutional religion, may rest with the churches themselves.

It should be remembered that although specific needs may continue to exist, and even to increase in urgency, they may find satisfaction in other ways than formerly ; people's tastes, or habits, change ; new circumstances and conditions arise which render the old ways inappropriate or impossible. Take for example the matter of housing. The need for shelter has grown rather than shrunk, and yet there is a certain class of house, formerly very popular, which is now a drug upon the market. Those large and pretentious villa residences which adorned the nearer suburbs of large towns in the Victorian epoch, are now only saleable for conversion into flats. Tastes and habits have changed. Supertax, the servant problem, and the internal-combustion engine have completely revolutionised the housing problem for the middle classes. They would not take the old villas as a gift.

The carriage and pair, the hansom cab, the life-size portrait, the heavy furniture of Victorian England have all vanished, the motor-car and the small house have banished them. They meet needs which are still felt but which find satisfaction in new ways.

Now it may be that the churches are endeavouring to meet the religious need by methods which are similarly out-of-date. It is as if a modern young couple were presented on their wedding day with a Victorian villa, Victorian furniture, and a carriage of the type known, I believe, as a victoria. They could not face it. The bridegroom would swear, and the bride would weep. There would be no satisfaction for anybody.

### IDEAS, NOT STUNTS

And when I suggest that the methods of the churches may be out-of-date, I do not wish to be thought to be advocating what are known as "modern methods." These have, one is informed, been carried to remarkable

lengths in America, with what real success does not appear. I do not want spot-lights, advertised subjects, soloists, bands, debates, nor yet commercial efficiency, business management, and the card-index system. When a church is spiritually bankrupt, it begins to make a cult of efficiency. For example, the post-war zeal for efficiency in the Church of England, of which the outward and visible sign has been the Enabling Act and its fruits, seems to me a grave sign of spiritual and intellectual penury. When machinery comes in at the door, religion flies out at the window : you cannot serve God and Mammon.

The churches will not be regenerated by ideals and methods imported from Hollywood, nor yet by business management. These things create a false sense of prosperity and modernity, but they fail. What we need is not new stunts and new machinery, but new ideas, new men, and new inspiration ; and these things cannot be manufactured to order, their appearance cannot be guaranteed. There is no possible mass-production of such articles, for " the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth."

I would not emphasise all this to the verge of tedium were it not for the pathetic faith of the present age in machinery of all kinds. It is the latest superstition, and the clergy (or at least those who are known as the higher clergy) have fallen victims to it wholesale. But the church that relies on machinery is lost.

### WHAT IS WRONG ?

The position would appear to be that the churches are depressed partly, but by no means solely, because the religious need has evaporated. It is indubitable that with large sections of the community the religious need seems to be almost non-existent, but this of itself is not sufficient to account for the slump in churchgoing, though it may account for a good deal of it. The fact remains



that the religious need is still felt by the best elements in the community, i.e. by the most intelligent and the most moral, but somehow the churches do not or cannot satisfy it for them. They want religion, but do not go to the parsons for it. Now, why is this ?

The reason appears to me to be that though the churches have at their disposal certain standardised satisfactions of the religious need, these satisfactions do not appease the religious need *as it is now being felt*. They served admirably once, but they will not serve now. It is not necessarily that they are too poor, but merely that they are a misfit. It is a case of the bridal pair being offered a Victorian mansion to dwell in ; they simply do not know what to do with it, it is not of the slightest use to them.

### UNINHABITABLE THEOLOGICAL MANSIONS

The churches are offering too much as well as too little. They offer a mansion large, imposing, comfortable, conventional ; but there are no takers. We want a dwelling, but not of that sort. We prefer a bungalow, or even a caravan ; as for a desirable villa residence, and all it means—rates, servants, conventionality—it simply stifles us. We want freedom, and we desire to live in some sort of contact with reality. We do not want so many cushions, or so little fresh air.

This, suitably translated, is more or less what the post-war generation of young people is thinking—those of them at least who are not merely jazzy-minded, and who therefore do not think at all.

The post-war generation does not want cocksure certainty, or dogmatism, or facile and ready-made solutions of any kind for life's problems. The books of the Bible which most definitely reflect its outlook are *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*, the one written by an agnostic, and the other by a pessimist whom it would not be altogether wrong to call an atheist.

Our serious-minded younger people, though not

agnostic in the technical sense of believing truth to be inaccessible to human beings, are nevertheless very doubtful if the problems of life admit of any easy or obvious solutions. And, rightly or wrongly, they are very suspicious of dogmatism; to be cocksure is inevitably in their eyes to be mistaken. This is why the pulpit to-day has so little influence with them; the preachers appear to take far too much for granted, and to be far too confident that they have the truth in their pocket. This attitude of mistrust may or may not be reprehensible, but it is common.

Thus the spiritual habitation which the modern generation is content to dwell in is rather a poor affair compared with the attractive and desirable villa residence which the preachers recommend. It has no imposing façade, it is a makeshift and draughty affair, sketchily built of inadequate materials. It is often nothing but a few boards hastily knocked together—an amateur business. Yet somehow it keeps out the rain, and the tenant is tolerably well satisfied. It is, he says, “a poor thing but mine own.”

### RELIGION WITHOUT CHURCHES

The villa-dwellers naturally do not care to admit that the fellow in the plank shanty may have the better habitation. In other words, the dogmatic preachers leave the agnostic rabble to pig it in their own sties. They feel that they have got the goods, and if the other fellow is too proud or too stupid to come along and take a share, but prefers his own squalid independence, that is his affair. The churches decide to leave the agnostic to carry on alone. He will not take what is offered, so he can go without.

The shanty-dweller for his part is only too glad to be left alone. He is content to live how he can, to consume his own smoke, and to be under no obligations to the villa-dweller. In other words, if he tries to satisfy his religious needs, he takes good care not to ask the churches to help him.

## MUTUAL DISASTER

It is not to be supposed that the religious life of those who thus unchurch themselves does not suffer. Cut off from the main stream of religious culture and tradition (which is what the Church claims to be) they can hardly avoid sinking into religious squalor ; that is to say, their religious life becomes poverty-stricken, self-centred, and in too many cases weak and fitful. They even become a prey to crank religions of various kinds, chiefly emanating from America.

It is true that many people claim to be able to be religious in isolation from their fellows, and of course solitude has often been a nurse of religion. But the great geniuses of religion who sought inspiration in solitude did not cut themselves off from the main stream of the religious tradition of their day. This, and not solitude alone, they felt to be the source of their inspiration. Even a great man like Spinoza, who was excommunicated by his fellow Jews, and called "an unclean and foul atheist" by a contemporary Christian, was not, like Melchisedek, without father and mother. In the first place he would have been other than he was but for his Spanish-Jewish ancestry, and in the next place he was the inheritor of a philosophic and mystical tradition, derived from such as Maimonides, and further back from the Neoplatonists. It is not even true that he broke with his church, for his church broke with him, as churches are wont to do with those they cannot understand.

It is important to realise how great is the debt which even those owe to a church who have cut themselves adrift from it and repudiated all allegiance to it. Some Anglicans, ignorant of history, or acquainted only with certain facts of history, still decry the Medieval Church. Nevertheless, apart from that Church, and the riches we have derived from it and which are enshrined in our liturgy, in our cathedrals, and elsewhere, what would Anglicanism be ? Then again, perhaps some Wesleyans are tempted to decry the Church of England ; but apart

from that Church, out of which they were born, where would they be? And is it not evident that they have lost far more than they have gained by going out of it?

And if this is true of churches, it is still more true of individuals. When they repudiate the religious institution to which in the last resort they owe every worthy ideal that inspires them, they become spiritually maimed. Nor should it be forgotten that the Church is also maimed by the loss of them. The disaster is mutual.

### PARASITIC IDEALISM

It should not be forgotten that a great deal of present-day idealism, social, philanthropic, political, though claiming independence from institutional religion, and sometimes hostile to it, is nevertheless dependent upon it. Apart from the altruistic ideals brought into existence and fostered by institutional religion in the past, the motive power of social idealism would be lacking. Even more obviously is this the case with definitely religious movements which sit very loosely to doctrinal loyalties. Before these movements run to seed a vast amount of genuine zeal goes to waste; the established religious institutions are the poorer, and the parasitic zealots themselves suffer spiritually and morally by attaching too much importance to themselves. Nor is this self-importance surprising, since undenominational philanthropy is supported by public opinion. Nevertheless, it is an interesting sign that with the decay of churches the supply of young and self-sacrificing idealists is drying up. . . . Post-war youth prefers tennis to philanthropy.

### AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

There seems to be no doubt, unfortunately, that institutional religion has less authority with the community at large now than was the case twenty or thirty years ago. It would not be difficult to find reasons for attributing the blame for this to the public at large,

which is often irreligious out of mere shallowness or carelessness or ignorance.

In institutional circles, i.e. amongst clergy, it is widely realised that the pressing need is for some enhancement of church authority, for the real trouble is that the people do not take it seriously. They do not, for instance, attach importance to what a church says merely because it is a church that says it.

Nor is this due, as is very often alleged, to the reluctance of the modern world to accept authority of any kind, for there exists an almost exaggerated respect for authority. To-day, the expert has a higher prestige than ever in every sphere, and has taken the place occupied by the prophet and the oracle of ancient days. The medical, financial, scientific, and psychological experts are regarded, each in their own sphere, as infallible. Committees listen to what they say, the newspapers print it, social and economic policy is guided by their pronouncements. This is the age of the expert ; he is in the heyday of his prestige and authority.

This applies in every sphere, save in that of religion. Here there is no accepted authority and every man is a law unto himself. The popular theory is that in a personal matter like religion, a man must be his own judge ; and the opinions of the uneducated or half-educated are of equal value with those of the specialist and expert. It is true that the public is not without respect for the opinions of certain individuals with regard to religion. But these authorities are not revered because they are expert in that sphere, but because they are expert in some other sphere ! The biologist, the physicist, the dramatist, the politician are held to be competent to pronounce infallibly upon what is admittedly the most difficult of all subjects, merely because they happen to be experts in some sphere of their own. In fact, amongst the uneducated, who after all form the majority in any community, anyone who is sufficiently notorious, is felt to be an authority worth listening to upon religion. The opinions of movie-stars, pugilists, even criminals, rank, in the popular estimation, above

those of bishops, and every charlatan exponent of a new crank religion can get a hearing.

This is, when you reflect upon it, a very remarkable state of affairs. At a time when the prestige of the expert stands higher than ever before in every sphere, the opinions of the expert in religion carry practically no weight at all, while people whose opinions are worthless are treated with respect.

One reason of this anomalous situation may be that the public has a wholesome dislike of religious dogmatism and intolerance, and fears that if we respect the religious expert too much he may impose some tyranny upon us ; he will light *autos-da-fé* in every public park. Yet, when you reflect upon it, the public has far less to fear from the religious dogmatist than from the dogmatist of science. The scientific industrialists are busy devising fresh methods of turning men into machines ; the scientific eugenists will soon be sterilising whom they will, and providing us all with mates. When the scientific dogmatist gets busy we shall long for the free old days of the Spanish Inquisition. Of several sorts of tyranny, religious, political, economic, and scientific, the last will undoubtedly be the worst. Others have chastised us with whips, but this will chastise us with scorpions. Even if it is beneficent, it will be soul-destroying and intolerable. It takes no very acute prophet to see that the days will come when another Erasmus will cover the scientists, instead of the monks, with ridicule, and exhort the people to burn down the laboratories. Perhaps this will happen after the next war, when people will have fully realised all that we owe to science—that is, if any of us are left to realise anything.

But fear of theological dogmatism is not the only, or even the chief reason, why religious authority is on the wane. The feeling has somehow got abroad that though the experts in other fields do honestly desire to get at the truth, so far as it may be attainable, yet in religion the experts are tied to old opinions which they have to justify at any cost. They are out to establish orthodoxy

rather than truth, the two things being by no means the same.

In part this is due to the popular but mistaken notion that what is new is necessarily true, and what is old necessarily or probably false. This notion itself is probably due to the present immense prestige of natural science, where theories are always changing, and a text-book is out of date in ten years. But it is forgotten that the two spheres of science and of religion are not really comparable. The religious tradition is very much older than the scientific tradition, and it is natural that religious ideas should by this time have reached a certain degree of stability. You cannot be experimenting for ever; there comes a time when, provisionally at any rate, you are content to settle down. It is easy to make scientific experiments, and easy to change scientific ideas; but is it so easy to make (let us say) ethical experiments, and to change ethical ideas? This is not to say that there should not be ethical development, but it is a matter which is rather less simple than some people imagine; less simple than the development of scientific technique.

It is also forgotten by those who wish to see theology as fluid as scientific theory, that it is much more easy in the sphere of science to prove that an old theory is no longer tenable than it is in the sphere of religion. In religion as in art "truth" is a far less simple matter than it is popularly held to be in science, though the scientists themselves know that it is far from simple in that sphere also. Dr. Eddington has told us that about half the physicists believe in the existence of the ether, and half do not; "but as a matter of fact both parties mean exactly the same thing, and are divided only by words."<sup>1</sup> Had a theologian used this language, he would have been accused of quibbling; but quite unjustly.

But after making all allowances, there remains a certain by no means negligible residuum of justice in the popular complaint that theologians are not out for truth

<sup>1</sup> *Science and the Unseen World* (1929), p. 42.

in quite the same way as other classes of experts appear to be.

It is seen that religious institutions, unlike all other institutions, profess definite hostility to change. It is indeed natural, as we have seen, that scientific institutions should encourage changes in scientific theory, and no one suggests that a theologian should be honoured, as a scientist is honoured, for having rendered some hitherto accepted view untenable, since theology (its tradition being older) is necessarily more conservative than science. But neither should it be expected that, as is now the case, every theological innovator should be overwhelmed with abuse by his fellow believers. His innovations may not be sound ; but if not, time and further research and experiment will prove them untenable. Even in the sphere of art, which has a tradition as old as that of religion, though the new does not establish itself very quickly, yet novelties do get accepted. The work of Epstein is considered on its merits by people who honestly try to smother their prejudices. And although intolerance and bigotry do exist, the moral obliquity of the innovator is not so much insisted on in the sphere of art as it is in the sphere of religion.

A religious institution is exposed, perhaps more than other institutions, to the temptation to standardise, mechanise, and immobilise the tradition which it enshrines, and of which it is the organ of expression. It tends, in other words, to regard its embodied tradition not as a gradual growth, but as a deposit, i.e. something given complete once and for all.

Now the difference between a deposit and a growth is that the former can persist without change whereas the latter cannot. An organism, or growth, has no choice but to change, though two sorts of change are open to it, growth or decay.

Thus if the " deposit " theory is held, it follows that changes are unnecessary, while if the " growth " theory is held, changes become inevitable, and may as well be encouraged as forbidden. And nothing more clearly indicates that religious institutions *are* growths (i.e. they,



their organisations, methods, beliefs) than that, though change is forbidden, change nevertheless takes place.

On no point are churches more sensitive than about changes of doctrine ; but while denials of and protests against them are being uttered, the changes go on. Modifications of doctrine quietly take place ; untenable notions are tacitly dropped. Nothing is more astonishing, though nothing is more natural, than the almost sudden passing out of currency of ideas which until recently were universally held. The doctrine of eternal punishment is a case in point. In the nineteenth century, the denial of it cost one man a bishopric and another a professorship. To-day it is very rarely held, except by Roman Catholics, and even they would perhaps hesitate to affirm the medieval doctrine that the majority of mankind will find their way to hell. (See Coulton's *The Inquisition*, in Benn's 6d. series, p. 14.)

What helps forward this movement of thought more than anything else is the capacity displayed by words to change their meanings. If a new idea can pass under an old name its offensive novelty is mitigated ; and if a man can only persuade himself that nothing is changed, he will tolerate the most extreme innovations. Just as Monsieur Jourdain had talked prose all his life without knowing it, so have many clergy been preaching "modernism" for many years in all innocence. One can fight against the appearance of change, but not against change itself. As Samuel Butler was fond of pointing out, to learn is hard, but to unlearn is still harder. There is a law of inertia in the sphere of ideas ; it is difficult to get them to move, but equally difficult to get them to stop moving when once they are fairly in motion. This applies in theology as elsewhere, and is the cause of the present doctrinal drift, as some call it, but which is in reality doctrinal advance.

### GROWTH OR DECAY

Churches may be regarded, then, as embodiments of a tradition which is an organic growth, which must either

continue to grow or else decay. As a matter of fact growth does take place, even though it is discouraged, or forbidden, or denied. Were it not for this stubborn capacity for growth the tradition would decay. But to say that the tradition is alive and growing is not to deny that it might display yet more vitality ; as it would do if growth were encouraged instead of being (as it now is) discountenanced.

And the authority of a church with the world at large would be very much increased if it were felt to be as hospitable to growth and change as is, for example, a university or a learned society. It would be taken at least as seriously as a university or learned society ; and its clergy would rank as experts and receive the respect that experts receive.

What churches fail to see is that the best way to preserve a tradition is to add to it ; but this cannot be done by isolating it from every individual who may be likely to adopt a critical attitude towards it. It is the critics who are the creative people in the long run.

Of course creative contributions to a tradition cannot be guaranteed. A church cannot announce its intention to provide machinery for fresh creative contributions to its tradition. Here we should have the vice of machinery over again. All a church can possibly do is to provide conditions which may help individuals who are likely to prove creative to interest themselves in religion, and if possible to devote themselves entirely to it. But this policy is not being followed.

At present it is a by no means encouraging feature that the educated classes are boycotting the ministry of the Church ; they cannot be induced to enter it, and the bishops in despair are forced to appeal for money to train recruits who are often from a less educated class. The real reason which makes many young men of the educated class reluctant to enter the ministry of the Church is that they do not think they will be intellectually free. Indeed the Church authorities do not lead them to suppose that they will be free in that sense ; even the amount of such freedom that does exist (which is not

inconsiderable) is concealed rather than advertised. The presence of "modernism" in a church is treated as something of which to be rather ashamed.

If I may be permitted a homely simile, I should say that most religious institutions at present are rather in the plight of those gooseberry bushes which in very early springtime have their budding shoots pecked off by hungry sparrows. The bushes lose their growing-points. In this parable the birds of the air are not the devil, but, on the contrary, those zealots for orthodoxy, those watchdogs of the Lord, who, like the angel at the gate of Paradise with his flaming sword, keep the gate of the Church against all who seek to enter without binding themselves to preserve unchanged in all respects the traditions of the past.

It is I think a pity. For our age, in spite of its scientific achievements, its humanitarian enthusiasms, its boundless energy and courage, and a number of other qualities probably unparalleled in the history of mankind, does need religious guidance. Apart from it, there is, of course, great fear that our greatest achievements may prove our undoing. Indeed this question of religion, avoid it as we may, is the important question of our time.

Cannot religion and contemporary culture somehow discover a *modus vivendi*? Or must religion repudiate our civilisation and civilisation return the compliment. One cannot envisage the results of such a catastrophe.

It is only through vigorous and enlightened religious institutions that a way will be found, for an unembodied religion would be as little able to achieve anything as an unorganised army. A tradition must express itself in an institution; but the institution must let the tradition grow, by growing itself. And growth means change. "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

#### NOTE

The best expression that I know of the "organic" view of religious institutions is the essay, *Reflections on Catholicism* in George Tyrrell's *Through Scylla and*

*Charybdis*. For the peculiar genius of Anglicanism read *The Genius of the English Church*, by Alfred Fawkes, and also *Church and State in England since the Reformation*, by N. Sykes (in Benn's Sixpenny Library). *The Church of England*, by Headlam is a work expressing what might be called the academic and episcopal, but nevertheless liberal point of view. *John Inglesant*, by Shorthouse, is essential to any real understanding of the contrasted attitudes of the Churches of England and of Rome. This is a work of genius. A book well worth reading, and exceptionally readable, is Kirsopp Lake's *Religion of Yesterday and To-morrow*; this is written from the extreme modernist and experimentalist attitude, and is somewhat hostile to religious institutions as at present constituted and guided; but displays great enthusiasm for religion. Those who desire a picture of the religion of the Great Uncivilised when unguided by an institutionalism in touch with culture should read Miss Winifred Holtby's *Eutychus or the Future of the Pulpit*, and Sinclair Lewis's terrible indictment, *Elmer Gantry*.

